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Letter from a war zone: Some thoughts on setting an activist agenda⁵⁶³

Rebecca Whisnant

In the past couple of months, I've thought a lot about what information I could present to a group of people with such a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding the matters this conference was created to discuss. It is particularly humbling to be asked to speak about activism, since many of the participants of this conference are much more involved in the front lines of this movement than I am. My hope is to offer a few reflections that may aid us in developing an activist agenda around pornography and prostitution that is both practical and visionary, both broad-based and politically coherent, both radically challenging and deeply humane. In so doing, I hope to make the most of certain occupational hazards of my profession, academia in general, and philosophy in particular, namely those of focusing on the big picture and painting in broad brush strokes. I'll be talking not about the nuts-and-bolts of activism, but about the overall analysis and the long-term strategy within which I would like to see anti-pornography activism be rooted.

Let me begin by outlining my understanding of the terrain we currently inhabit. As some other speakers have indicated, we are in a different world with respect to these issues than we were, say, 10 to 15 years ago when I first started learning about them and then teaching about them. The two major developments that I have in mind are both well known to those working in this field and have been mentioned by a number of participants at this conference, but I think it is worth rehearsing them explicitly again, in order then to think some more about their interconnections and their specific relevance to our thinking and activism around pornography and prostitution. The first is the massive mainstreaming, expansion, and public acceptance of what is euphemistically called the "sex industry." The second is the extreme right-wing turn in recent U.S. political culture. With respect to the latter, I have in mind both its economically neo-liberal and its socially conservative aspects.

Meanwhile, it will come as no news to anyone present that the anti-pornography movement is made up of people many of whom, apart from their opposition to pornography and prostitution, have deeply opposing political values and ideologies. Some, like myself, are feminist and quite radically so, committed not only to eradicating prostitution and pornography as forms of abuse and discrimination against women, but also to promoting a range of other significant freedoms for women and girls and to mounting a broad panoply of challenges to patriarchal values and institutions. Most of these people also support politically liberal-to-left positions on a whole range of issues; from war, imperialism, and globalization to sexual orientation and reproductive rights. Other anti-pornography activists are socially conservative and politically right-wing, committed to at least some aspects of a highly traditionalist view of gender relations and strongly opposed to some of the very freedoms that we as feminists support. For some, an opposition to pornography and prostitution is rooted in religiously-based moral commitments that may be, but are certainly not always, conservative in nature. In this context, it may make most sense to speak not of "the" anti-pornography movement but rather of a variety of different and sometimes conflicting political and ethical commitments that inform different people's and organizations' opposition to the sex industry.

Sexual economics: The terrible truth

For those of us who view the expansion and mainstreaming of the sex industry and the rightward turn in U.S. politics with profound alarm, I hope to offer some ideas about how we can bring our unique perspective to bear on the pornography issue in a way that remains faithful to our broader political commitments. First, however, I want to suggest to those who approach this issue from a socially conservative point of view that their work against pornography and prostitution is, in fact, seriously undermined by whatever commitments they may have to other elements of a right-wing political and economic agenda. The mainstreaming of pornography and the rightward turn in U.S. politics are *both* disastrous for women and girls; and contrary to beliefs common on both the political right and the political left, these two phenomena are deeply interconnected. Indeed, they are two sides of the same coin.

In explaining this claim, I am indebted to a number of feminist thinkers, but perhaps most directly and recently to D.A. Clarke, who brilliantly analyzes the connections between prostitution and neo-liberal economics, as well as the mind-boggling hypocrisies, on both the political right and left, that result

from obscuring said connections.⁵⁶⁴ I will count my brief discussion here a success if it motivates some readers to seek out Clarke's essay; there are few whose political assumptions and alliances will remain unchallenged by a careful consideration of her analysis.

In short, right-wing policies feed both the supply side and the demand side of the traffic in women and girls. The demand side of this equation can be stated clearly enough: whatever intensifies the crisis conditions for women, both here and elsewhere in the world, increases their desperation and hence their vulnerability to pimps and predators. Many of the economic and foreign policies implemented by the Bush administration and defended by many conservatives do precisely this, thus more than counterbalancing their few valuable initiatives against the sex industry. Specifically, the right's relentless dismantling of social and economic safety nets creates ever-expanding supplies of desperate women and girls with only one thing they can sell to survive. Domestically, we see this pattern in everything from welfare "reform" to the Bush tax cuts that channel wealth upward, shrinking the middle class and increasing the numbers of people living in poverty. Abroad, we see it in the imperatives of neo-liberal globalization, which Clarke describes as follows:

Wherever the neoclassical economists administer their shock treatments, the pimps clean up. Women from the former Soviet Union, for example, have been for sale all over the Middle East, Asia, and wealthy Europe since the collapse of the Soviet regime which took down with it their chances of an education or a decent job. The story recurs wherever a country which once enjoyed some kind of social safety net has it ripped away.

Above the line, the transnational vultures acquire physical plant, rolling stock, mines, land, warehouses full of goods, all for pennies on the dollar. Local "entrepreneurs" (usually the ruling elite who since colonial times have owned most of the land and other resources) snap up public services and public property in an orgy of privatisation and sign sweetheart deals with foreign corporations.

Meanwhile, below the line, the pimps scoop up the "surplus" women at bargain prices, and drug dealers open whole new markets among the newly miserable and despairing. Everybody wins—the predators and parasites, anyway. As in conventional wars, so in economic warfare: women and children generally lose.⁵⁶⁵

Furthermore, the damage and dislocation caused by war deprives families of their normal sources of income, and thus channels women and young girls into prostitution. A recent news article indicates that precisely this has occurred as a result of the Bush administration's tragic and unnecessary invasion of Iraq.⁵⁶⁶

To approach the matter from a slightly different angle, think about what is necessary in order for those women currently in prostitution to get out of it. No guesswork is required here; we can find out what they would need by simply asking them, as Melissa Farley and Jacqueline Lynne did as part of their recent study of women prostituting on the streets in Vancouver:

Eighty-six percent of these women . . . reported current or past homelessness, with housing being an urgent need. Ninety-five percent stated that they wanted to leave prostitution. Eighty-two percent expressed a need for treatment for drug and alcohol addiction. They also voiced a need for a home or safe place (66 percent), job training (67 percent), health care (41 percent), peer support (41 percent), and self-defense training (49 percent).⁵⁶⁷

In short, these women need service and support—not occasional acts of charity, but consistent, respectful, and, above all, well-funded public services to meet their overwhelming needs. To oppose their abuse in prostitution while supporting an overall dramatic shrinkage in public services and (again) a relentless upward flow of wealth in the society is, truly, to give with one hand while taking away far more with the other.

Policies and practices that *increase* women's control of their lives, and particularly women's economic independence: welfare, equal pay, fair housing, universal health coverage, bankruptcy protection, and more, are ways of fighting prostitution and pornography. Policies and practices that *undermine* women's control of their lives, in fact, ensure that these industries continue to devastate the health and well-being of women and children. It must be said, in addition, that an essential part of women's control of their lives is their control of their fertility. For feminists, reproductive freedom, including comprehensive sex education, contraception, and safe, legal, funded abortion, is a principled commitment. I have no illusions about convincing those opposed to these freedoms that they should change their views, but I do feel compelled to point out that a poor woman who cannot control her fertility is that much more likely to become economically desperate, and we know where that too often leads. So, again, there is a profound tension

between the commitment of social conservatives to fighting prostitution and pornography, and their often equally passionate opposition to women's reproductive self-determination.

So much for the supply side. It is equally vital to understand the ideologies and attitudes that fuel the (overwhelmingly male) demand for the services of prostituted women and children. Here due credit must be given to the efforts of social conservatives, many of whom have tried mightily to get men to renounce their addiction to pornography, and in various ways to take responsibility for the consequences of their predatory sexual behavior. While these efforts are seldom couched in terms of the broader ideologies and values that I would most prefer, I appreciate whatever benefits have redounded to the women—their wives and girlfriends as well as women in the sex industry—who would have otherwise suffered from these men's compulsion to use and consume women as sexual commodities.

Again, however, this element of conservative opposition to pornography and prostitution poses a stark contradiction with other elements of a standard conservative political ideology. As Clarke explains, neo-liberal economic ideology, with its deification of "free" market exchange as by nature fair and beneficial to all parties, prohibits any ethical critique of consumer demand, no matter what its cost to others, and that includes the demand of johns for paid access to women's bodies and souls, in both prostitution and pornography:

"What a john he is" not only lacks the derogatory punch of "What a whore she is," but sounds artificial and contrived because "john" is not a conventionally insulting epithet. I propose that "What a john he is" can never be a catchy epithet in the context of hegemonic capitalist ideology. To question the demand side of any market is dangerous ground in contemporary American public discourse. The religion of the Market rests on a fundamental assumption that all desires and appetites are valid . . .⁵⁶⁸

Furthermore, the attitude that big business is good, and that what is good for big business and those who control it is good for America—an attitude unfortunately common across most of the U.S. political mainstream, but ratcheted up to truly shocking levels by the Bush administration and its supporters—works directly at cross-purposes with any attempt to criticize and restrain the prostitution and pornography industries. For, as Clarke argues and as Gail Dines has usefully reminded us, pornography *is* big business, now so thoroughly intertwined with powerful multinational corporations that

the two are barely distinguishable. To the extent that we are in the grip of a fundamentally right-wing economic ideology in which money and profit are worshipped, and in which commitment to the imperatives of big business is practically a religion, it becomes very difficult to see something as profitable as the sex industry as in any way harmful or in need of significant restraint.

Another element of right-wing ideology that supports prostitution and pornography is best summed up in the simple slogan that "might makes right." That is, those with physical and economic power are entitled to control the behavior and extract the resources and labor of others, and to retaliate violently against any attempt to resist that control and extraction. We see this dynamic most recently and dramatically in the ramped-up militarism of the Bush administration, in its imperial drive toward (in its own words) "full spectrum dominance," and of course specifically in the invasion and continuing bloody occupation of Iraq.⁵⁶⁹ As Robert Jensen has demonstrated so heartbreakingly,⁵⁷⁰ the ideology of pornography is the ideology of imperialist war: it says, among other things, that victims of aggression are grateful for the violence against them, and if they are not, then they deserve and invite still more violence. Cheering Iraqis will throw flowers at the feet of U.S. invaders, and girls-gone-wild will eagerly lap up the ejaculate of the men who dominate and abuse them, and if they don't, then that just shows that they don't understand freedom. It must be said, and in no uncertain terms: the swaggering and braggadocio of the Bush administration, domestically, and especially internationally, is that of the pimp and the john, the porn user and the rapist. In both cases the worship of power is complete and absolute, specifically and most of all, the power of money and of violence to force compliance with one's self-defined "needs."

What must of course be added here is that this ideology of authority and entitlement, of the glory and virtue in taking what one wants from those less powerful, is not gender-neutral, but specifically masculine and deeply patriarchal. This brings us to a third way in which many conservatives' opposition to pornography and prostitution is deeply paradoxical given their other political commitments. The core ideology of pornography, that it is women's natural role to serve and submit to men sexually, is in fact a highly traditional one, infused with the unquestioned primacy of male needs and male authority. To defend this conception of privileged masculinity as natural, right, and God-given overall, but to oppose its specifically sexual manifestation in pornography and prostitution, is both incoherent and counterproductive. It bolsters a notion of male authority in the family that fuels the domestic abuse of women and children, which in turn feeds the sex industry. As Lee

Lakeman puts it in her recent critical analysis of regressive changes in Canadian divorce and welfare law,

We will not solve prostitution without solving incest. And we will not solve incest without allowing and aiding women socially and financially to leave the families of men who use sexual violence to enforce their status.⁵⁷¹

Thus, a conservative gender ideology that includes a traditional notion of male authority in the family, the economic dependence of women on men, and the importance of "keeping families together" at all costs, seriously undermines the fight against prostitution and pornography, both by making women and girls more vulnerable to abuse by male family members, and by making it more difficult for them to leave.

The seamless interweaving of different forms and justifications of male sexual privilege can be seen starkly in the case of Dr. David Hager, a socially conservative obstetrician-gynecologist whose intractable opposition to women's reproductive rights and to premarital sex has made him a darling of the Bush administration. Over vociferous protest from feminist and pro-choice groups, the administration appointed Hager in 2002 to the FDA's Advisory Committee for Reproductive Health Drugs, from which post he subsequently played an important role in scuttling the attempt to gain over-the-counter status for emergency contraception. It was thus surprising to many, but not to radical feminists, that, according to his former wife, Linda Carruth Davis, Dr. Hager subjected her to habitual sexual commodification and abuse during the course of their 32-year marriage.

I want to quote Ms. Davis's account, as reported in a recent article in *The Nation*, at some length, because of the clarity with which it demonstrates the fundamental synonymy of conservative and pornographic sexual ideologies. According to Ms. Davis, sex in this marriage, even when nominally consensual, soon became quite openly a form of prostitution:

By the 1980s . . . Hager was pressuring her to let him videotape and photograph them having sex. She consented, and eventually she even let Hager pay her for sex that she wouldn't have otherwise engaged in—for example, \$2,000 for oral sex, "though that didn't happen very often because I hated doing it so much. So though it was more painful, I would let him sodomize me, and he would leave a check on the dresser," Davis admitted to me with some embarrassment. This exchange took place almost weekly for several years."⁵⁷²

Furthermore, Hager pressured her relentlessly to engage in other sexual acts that she did not want, including anal sex, sometimes initiating these activities while she was asleep.

"I would be asleep," she recalls, "and since [the sodomy] was painful and threatening, I woke up. Sometimes I acquiesced once he had started, just to make it go faster, and sometimes I tried to push him off . . . I would [confront] David later, and he would say, 'You asked me to do that,' and I would say, 'No, I never asked for it.'"

The blithe conviction that because he wanted a certain sexual service from her, she too must have wanted it, indeed, literally "asked for it," is, of course, pornographic ideology *par excellence*. In later years, after Linda's diagnosis with narcolepsy, Hager frequently sodomized her in her sleep, thus, obviously, without even the semblance of her consent. From 1995 until their divorce in 2002, according to Davis, he sodomized her without her consent roughly once a month.

In highlighting this case, I do not mean to suggest that Hager's behavior is representative of all or even most conservative men, nor indeed that many leftist and liberal men do not also sexually abuse the women in their lives, but rather to point out that Hager's conservative gender ideology, far from restraining his abusive behavior, actually justified and fueled it. Since Hager has refused to comment on his ex-wife's allegations, we cannot know for sure what he would say, but it is not difficult to construct for ourselves an account of how such behavior fits within, and is justified by, an ideology of gender that positions men as the unquestioned authorities of their families. As far as Hager was concerned, he was entitled to decide what sexual activities would and would not take place. She was his wife—his, possessive—and her duty was to submit. That the particular sex acts he wanted were, shall we say, off the beaten path as far as standard conservative sexual morality is concerned—indeed, that they may as well have been (and probably were) straight out of the pages of a porn magazine, is neither here nor there. The point is that, in his mind, her body was *his* to do with as he pleased, and he felt entirely justified in using his superior economic and physical power to take what was, after all, his in the first place.

Feminism: An agenda

It has been the vital insight of radical feminism that male sexual ownership of women is a matter of fundamental *agreement* between the male-defined political

right and the equally male-defined political left. As Andrea Dworkin showed, most memorably (to my mind) in her indispensable 1992 article "Women in the Public Domain,"⁵⁷³ the right supports the private male ownership of women one at a time, localized in the home and family, whereas the left supports men's public and collectivized sexual ownership of women outside the home, in the "public domain." To reject *both* forms of male sexual ownership, as radical feminists do, is thus to commit the ultimate heresy; yet only just such consistent and principled rejection stands any chance of stopping the sexualized abuse and commodification of women both inside and outside the "traditional family."

The cheerful celebration of pornography and prostitution, and the sneering contempt directed at anti-pornography feminists, by the vast majority of those on the political left should come as no surprise to us, given Dworkin's analysis. And yet I suspect I am not alone among radical feminists in always still, somehow, being stunned by it. As Clarke observes,

Violently misogynist websites are reviewed with smug approval in "liberal" and "progressive" publications (both virtual and paper); traditional leftist journals such as *The Nation* continue to support pornographers as some kind of heroes of free speech and secular liberation . . . Allegedly "leftist", "progressive" men declare their loyalty (both as customers and partisans) to one of the biggest and most exploitative sweatshop industries of them all. Men who would not be caught dead wearing Reeboks or Nikes, or drinking Starbucks coffee, can still kid themselves into thinking Larry Flynt is some kind of People's Hero."⁵⁷⁴

Exposing the misogyny and hypocrisy of most leftist men on these issues, and, most tragically of all, that of many leftist women as well, has been a major concern for radical feminists, including a number of contributors to Christine Stark's and my recent anthology, *Not For Sale*.⁵⁷⁵ Since I expect these pathologies of the left to be sadly familiar to most of the audience for this paper, I will not further analyze or rehearse examples of them here. I simply mention them in order to underline the frequency with which those of us whose opposition to pornography and prostitution is rooted in radical feminism find ourselves politically homeless, frustrated by the attempt to make our concerns heard in political contexts, both right and left, that are profoundly inhospitable to one or more aspects of our commitment to women's freedom and dignity.

For those who are politically homeless, it can be tempting to seek shelter wherever it is available, particularly when bad weather looms. I think that

the hostility of the left, combined with the burgeoning crisis created by the mainstreaming of the sex industry, explains why, for some anti-pornography feminists in recent years, it has been tempting to seek a stronger alliance with elements of the conservative right wing than others of us, including myself, deem wise. Though few feminists are naïve about the limited and surface nature of our agreement with the political right on this issue, it is tempting to sweep the kinds of conflicts and tensions that I've been discussing under the rug. The crisis is so acute, and these are the people with money and power, and they agree with us about pornography and prostitution. After all, beggars can't be choosers. Thus, for some feminists, it has seemed only practical to join forces with conservatives on this particular issue, to cooperate where we can while quietly agreeing to disagree about pretty much everything else. We form a stronger force against the pornography industry together than apart, the reasoning goes. So what's not to like?

I want to suggest that it is not nearly that simple, and that the strategy of allying with the right wing in a fairly unreflective way holds significant perils for those whose commitments are both radically feminist and broadly progressive. The reasons for extreme caution in such alliances, in my view, are both principled and practical. As radical feminists, our opposition to *all* forms of women's subordination, to *all* ways in which women's freedom and dignity are abridged, must be both indivisible and consistently evident in what we do and say. I will go out on a limb here and say that, in fact, this is the core meaning of radical feminism, and that whenever we stray too far from this uncompromising vision, as Andrea Dworkin reminded us over 20 years ago, we "cannot combat antifeminism because [we have] incorporated it."⁵⁷⁶ My suggestion is that, for anti-pornography feminists at this political moment, heeding Dworkin's warning means that, in our education and activism around pornography and prostitution, we should *explicitly* challenge and resist the rightward turn in U.S. politics and *explicitly* tie our analysis to promoting a broadly feminist and progressive political agenda.

Much more than fifteen or ten or even five years ago, the right wing is the cultural template, the unquestioned background, the most readily available and ubiquitous model for making sense of the world. As a result, I have found that as I teach and speak about pornography in recent years, I feel the need simply to *say* more often that I am not part of the right wing, and that the right's analysis of pornography is not my analysis, and that the right's vision of proper sexual and gender relations is not my vision. One important way of doing this, which I'm sure other feminists have adopted as well, is to make it very clear that our proposed alternative to pornographic sexual ideology

is very different from that of social conservatives. Because those on the right typically emphasize abstinence and a restriction of legitimate sexual activity to legally married heterosexuals, this is one place where we can and should openly distinguish our vision from theirs. We can make it clear that we support people's freedom to love and have sex with others of their own gender, and the right of everyone, including unmarried women and girls, to say yes, as well as no, to sex and to define for themselves a respectful and egalitarian sexuality in defiance of patriarchal imperatives. I think we need to find ways to tap into many women's and girls' intuitive knowledge that sexuality can indeed be dangerous for them in this culture, while helping them to see that true freedom and safety can come only from challenging sexual authoritarianism in *all* its forms and from claiming each person's right to sexual and reproductive sovereignty and self-determination.

This is but one example of what I am claiming is a need for feminists to position our critique of pornography and prostitution as part of a broad feminist and social justice agenda, and to incorporate that critique into a multi-faceted resistance to various regressive and authoritarian trends in our political culture. I am acutely aware that this charge may seem like just piling more onto our already overloaded plates. But given the longtime good work on numerous fronts of many people at this conference, I know I am not alone in thinking that such a broad and complex analysis is essential to any lasting or meaningful victory. We cannot fight every foe, or talk about all of the issues and their interconnections, in any one article or event or discussion or protest, but such analysis must be a constant backdrop that informs our strategies and priorities as a social justice movement.

What this amounts to in practice, of course, is a vexed matter. I will offer just a few preliminary ideas, in the interest of stimulating continued discussion.

First, as I've already indicated, I think that we radical feminists need to be cautious and reflective in our decisions about whether, when, and in what ways to ally ourselves with elements of the political right wing. My view is not that we should function as a hermetically sealed enclave, unwilling ever to work cooperatively for limited purposes with others with whom we do not agree on every issue. After all, that would bar us from allying with most elements of the political left, too. There is no point in being slaves to the standard male-defined division of political camps, and there are times when we simply need any help we can get, from whoever is willing to offer it. At the same time, I believe that we should be attentive to the implications of certain alliances for women and girls generally, in the whole range of their

needs for freedom and self-determination, because that is what feminism itself requires. In particular, we should be extremely cautious about having our agenda dictated or overly shaped by the political agenda and the funding imperatives of the political and religious right. A lack of due caution in this vein may lead us unwittingly to lend moral legitimacy and support to agendas hostile to women, girls, and other vulnerable and exploited populations both here and abroad. We will not always all reach the same judgments here, and I believe there is some room for reasonable disagreement on these matters among feminists. But I do think that we need to think broadly about our ethical and political commitments when we make decisions about with whom to ally ourselves, when, how, and for what purposes.

Before moving on, let me court controversy by briefly discussing one case in which, it seems to me, we risk running afoul of these cautions. From day one in office, the Bush administration has made no secret of its willingness to use its political and funding power to strong-arm Non-Governmental Organizations, not to mention scholars and research bodies in certain politically sensitive fields, into saying and doing only what fits the administration's political agenda.⁵⁷⁷ In 2003, the administration imposed a funding requirement on groups combating AIDS in foreign countries: in order to receive U.S. aid, such groups must assert their opposition to prostitution and trafficking. In June 2005, this requirement was extended to similar groups in the U.S.

I am aware of the unethical behavior of some anti-AIDS groups that, in their efforts to (for instance) distribute condoms to prostituted women and children, advocate the legalization of prostitution and form alliances with pimps and predators. I agree with feminists who have argued convincingly that efforts against prostitution and trafficking should focus on enabling women to escape from prostitution, and on challenging the power of pimps and the prerogatives of johns, rather than on providing marginally safer and more respectable ways for them to continue to abuse women. At the same time, I find myself extremely uncomfortable with the administration's global imposition of what is, in effect, a "gag rule" regarding prostitution, one structurally identical to the notorious "gag rule" regarding abortion. In both cases, it seems to me, an authoritarian and rigidly ideological approach, combined with inattentiveness to its direct and deadly consequences for vulnerable populations of women, amounts in the end to saying to such women, "do what we say or die."

My own inclination is to look for ways in which the global movement against prostitution and trafficking can *both* challenge the fundamental legitimacy of the industry *and* contribute to the immediate safety and

well-being of those women who are currently in it and either cannot or for whatever reason choose not to get out. I realize that this is much easier said than done, and that the questions around a "harm reduction" approach to prostitution are extraordinarily difficult. I understand why other feminists might weigh the costs and benefits here differently. My point is just that these are conversations that, as feminists, we need to be having.

This brings me to my next general suggestion, which is that, whenever possible, we should employ our unique analysis as radical feminists to generate distinctive ideas about how to be directly helpful to those women currently being used in prostitution and pornography. Too often, it seems to me, we remain in a reactive posture, either agreeing or, more often, vehemently disagreeing with others' proposals: the liberal left's tiresome ideas about legalization and unionizing strippers, for instance, or the right's use of obscenity law to bring down a pornographer or two. What would it look like if, instead, or at least in addition, we tried to disengage from standard conservative and liberal ways of approaching the issue, and set an independent agenda for specifically radical and feminist activism?

I'll offer just one specific idea here, one that lies somewhat outside my own area of expertise, and on some elements of which other feminists have, to their enduring credit, already embarked. We know well that women who are in jail or prison for prostitution do not belong there, that the criminal record they acquire only impedes their chances of later escaping prostitution, and that they are often being further abused while imprisoned. In my current radical feminist fantasy, we undertake a campaign to free these women or get some kind of clemency for them, in the process raising public awareness not only about the harms of prostitution but about women in prison generally: why they are there, what they did, or, more accurately, what was done to them; about other social justice issues concerning the prison system; *and* also about the justice and efficacy of the "Swedish model," which decriminalizes the women, but not the pimps and johns, in prostitution.⁵⁷⁸ This is one idea, offered in the spirit of brainstorming, as an example of pursuing our agenda in a way that connects truly radical analysis with a commitment to helping women now.

I hope, too, that we feminists will not give up on those on the political left who should, and perhaps can, be brought around to a critical feminist perspective on pornography and prostitution. Granted, this is an uphill battle and one inevitably rife with disappointments, but there can be no political effort more significant than the attempt to build empathy, support, and cooperation among various elements of a broad movement for social justice

and equality. There is far more long-term promise here, in my view, than in a narrow strategic alliance with the political right wing whose fundamental values, ideologies, and visions of a decent society are so diametrically opposed to our own. When speaking to putatively liberal and/or leftist audiences, we must continue to emphasize not only that pornography is misogynist but also that it is authoritarian, not rebellious and individualistic; that it is corporate monoculture *par excellence*; that it is the cynical profiteering manipulation of consumer desire; that it is abuse of the powerless by vicious amoral capitalist overlords; that it is everything that, *qua* leftists, they supposedly don't like and are against. That is, here as elsewhere, we must be able to state the case against pornography and prostitution in terms that make sense to a given audience.

Beyond bringing at least a few freethinking leftists into the fold, of course, we need, as every political movement does, to continue thinking of ways to attract more people to our ranks. For one thing, because of the spread of pornography and pornographic ideology throughout the culture at large, I propose that we start thinking of some ways to introduce our perspectives to students in K-12 schools. When 10-year-old boys are playing wildly popular video games in which you get points for killing a prostitute, college is too late. Sadly, even high school is likely to be too late, but that's probably the best we can hope for. At the risk of belaboring a point made earlier, it is important to notice how this is made very difficult by the increasing control of sex-education agendas by the conservative right. If all we are allowed to say about sexuality is "abstinence, period," that makes it pretty hard to have a wide-ranging discussion with high school students about sexual values, consent, respect, and pornography.

More generally, but probably most importantly, we need to develop some good, *concrete* answers for the question most often asked by those newly exposed to a feminist critique of pornography: namely, "what can I do?" These are people who are on our side, who are fired up and have some enthusiasm, but most of whom have limited time and energy to give. They are vulnerable to despair and powerlessness just as we are. If we can't give them three steps that they can take right now to fight the pimps and pornographers, we lose them. And I mean something more direct and concrete than just telling them to talk to people about the issue when they can; something that will give them a sense of direct political efficacy, while also recognizing that most of them are not going to be willing or able to give slideshows, commit civil disobedience, give much or even any money, or make long-term commitments to an activist organization. We need to have structures that people can tap

into and make some limited contribution, whether it's a divorced woman with four kids, or a college student who's already involved in three progressive organizations and carrying a full course load, or whoever it might be. I hope that, as a result of this conference, we will be able to generate some new ideas and organizational structures for expanding the movement and mobilizing the energy of potential new participants.

The power of words

In March, when I delivered an earlier version of this paper at the Chicago conference, many of us regretted greatly the absence of Andrea Dworkin from our ranks there. Within a month after we left Chicago, Dworkin was gone, her premature death leaving so many of us bereft and leaving, as one contributor to a memorial website put it, "an Andrea-Dworkin-shaped hole in the universe."⁵⁷⁹ So now, I am especially inclined to turn to Dworkin's writings for inspiration and principled guidance through the complex political terrain I've tried to navigate here.

Dworkin was, of course, one of the primary theorists, architects, and activists of anti-pornography feminism; that alone leaves us profoundly in her debt. But she also constantly reminded us of the indivisibility of the feminist agenda: that we cannot promote the interests of some women on the backs of other women, that we cannot trade off our commitment to one aspect of women's freedom for some promise on another front. She also repeatedly emphasized the importance of *not* collaborating with male power, in either its leftist or its rightist form. When we do, she reminded us in 1990, we are "making it easier for them to hurt other women."⁵⁸⁰ I have tried, in this piece, to point out some landmines of just this sort that we face as beleaguered anti-pornography feminists. In the same 1990 speech, however, Dworkin said the following:

[P]art of having a feminist resistance to male power includes expanding the base of that resistance to other women, to women you have less in common with, to women you have nothing in common with. It means active, proselytizing dialogue with women of many different political viewpoints because their lives are worth what your life is worth.⁵⁸¹

In view of the complex political challenges I have laid out here, "active, proselytizing dialogue" is about as good a summary of what's called for as I can think of, and I would add that, as a matter of practical necessity, it must

involve not only women, but also men of varying political viewpoints. That doesn't mean finding the least common denominator, the one thing we can all find to agree on, and sweeping the rest of our disagreements under the rug.

As radical feminists, our best hope lies in not writing off either committed conservatives or diehard pornography-defending leftists as hopeless. Like many academics, I have a stubborn and persistent faith in the power of persuasion, argument, and reasoned dialogue to change minds and bridge seemingly unbridgeable divides. Our role as radical feminists, as I envision it, is to try to drag our conservative cohorts in the fight against pornography and prostitution, kicking and screaming if necessary, toward a more progressive and feminist social vision, *and* to try to drag our progressive allies in other efforts, also kicking and screaming, toward a critical analysis of prostitution and pornography. It's a thankless task, but it has to be done. We must continually remind conservatives that prostitution and pornography exist most basically because men and women are unequal, and that getting rid of them requires challenging that inequality in all its forms. We must continually remind leftists that their fundamental commitment to opposing exploitation and inequality requires that they line up in this fight, too, on the side of those exploited, not on the side of those who use and profit from them. In this way, perhaps, we can use the seamlessness of our opposition to *all* the interconnected forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, and indeed to all the interconnected forms of injustice and oppression generally, as a deep wellspring of inspiration, energy, and creativity.

In considering Gail Dines' observations about the decreasing power of words and text in an image-based culture,⁵⁸² I was reminded of one of my own most beloved Dworkin essays, called "The Power of Words." It's a speech she gave in the late 1970's in support of a group of college women who were occupying the offices of their misogynist and male-controlled campus newspaper. I want to quote from this essay, in hopes that Dworkin's words can aid us in thinking anew about how to make progress in this movement:

Feminists are occupying the offices of the *Collegian* because words matter. Words can be used to educate, to clarify, to inform, to illuminate. Words can also be used to intimidate, to threaten, to insult, to coerce, to incite hatred, to encourage ignorance. Words can make us better or worse people, more compassionate or more prejudiced, more generous or more cruel. Words matter because words significantly determine what we know and what we do. Words change us or keep us the same. Women, deprived of words, are deprived of life.⁵⁸³

With this in mind, as much as I agree with Gail Dines that we also need to find new ways to engage the power of images, I want to emphasize that we cannot abandon our faith in the power of words. That power is, in the end, the source of all our victories, the very few big ones and the many more small ones, like the woman student for whom seeing a pornography slideshow and hearing me speak words about it gives her the voice to say, in words, "that happened to me, and it was wrong, and I'm not alone."

At the end of "The Power of Words," Dworkin says of the men who control the *Collegian* what we in this movement must say, and are saying, of pornographers, pimps, johns, rapists, batterers, and their legions of apologists, wherever they fall on the political spectrum: "It is honorable and right to take from them the power they have so abused. I hope that you will strip them of it altogether. In the words of the great Emmeline Pankhurst, I incite this meeting to rebellion."⁵⁸⁴ So now, to borrow the words of the great Andrea Dworkin, visionary founder, militant prophet, departed sister, "I incite this meeting to rebellion."